
Judiciary Committee

HB 2822

Title: An act relating to the family and juvenile court improvement program.

Brief Description: Concerning the family and juvenile court improvement program.

Sponsors: Representatives Kagi, Walsh, Lantz, Dickerson, Haler, Sullivan, Seaquist and Kenney.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates a grant program for the improvement of family and juvenile courts.
- Requires courts, in order to be eligible for grants, to meet certain criteria, including: (a) the assignment of a chief judge to the family and juvenile court for at least two years; (b) implementation of one judicial team hearing all proceedings in a case involving one family; and (c) requiring specialized training of judicial officers.
- Requires the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate the grant program.

Hearing Date: 1/25/08

Staff: Trudes Tango (786-7384).

Background:

Superior courts have jurisdiction over family law proceedings, such as dissolutions, parenting plans, child custody, child support orders, paternity, and adoption. In counties with more than one superior court judge, the court designates one or more of the judges to hear all family law proceedings. Each superior court sets the terms of rotation for its family law judges.

Juvenile court, which is a statutorily created division of superior court, hears cases involving juvenile offenses and infractions, dependencies, termination of parental rights, family reconciliation (such as at-risk youth petitions), out-of-home placements, interstate compact on juveniles, and emancipation of minors.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Unified Family Court (UFC) is a model for handling cases involving children and families. The five principles of the UFC are: (1) the assignment of one judicial team to one family; (2) centralized case management; (3) specialized education for judicial officers; (4) longer-term judicial assignments to provide continuity for families; and (5) mandatory mediation in certain cases.

The Superior Court Judges' Association and the Board for Judicial Administration have adopted the UFC principles as best practices. In 1999, the Legislature created a pilot program for three counties to implement the UFC, and other counties have, on their own, implemented the UFC principles.

In 2007, the Board for Judicial Administration created a Family and Juvenile Court Improvement Workgroup. The workgroup developed a plan that suggests the creation of a grant program to encourage and fund improvements to local family and juvenile court operations.

Summary of Bill:

A family and juvenile court improvement grant program is created, to be administered by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC). A superior court may apply for grants from the program by submitting a local improvement plan to the AOC.

To be eligible for grant money, the court's plan must meet criteria established by the AOC. The AOC criteria must be consistent with the UFC principles. In addition, the court's plan must: (1) commit to a chief judge assignment to the family and juvenile court for a minimum of two years; (2) implement the principal of one judicial team hearing all of the proceedings in a case involving one family, especially in dependency cases; and (3) require court commissioners and judges assigned to family and juvenile court to receive a minimum of 30 hours specialized training in topics related to family and juvenile law within six months of assuming duties on the family and juvenile court. Courts should try to utilize local, statewide, and national training forums. A judicial officer's educational history may be applied toward the 30-hour requirement.

Topics for training must include: (1) parentage; (2) adoption; (3) domestic relations; (4) dependencies and terminations; (5) child development; (6) the impact of child abuse and neglect; (7) domestic violence; (8) substance abuse; (9) mental health; (10) juvenile status offenses; (11) juvenile offenders; (12) self-representation issues; (13) cultural competency; and (14) roles of judges and commissioners.

Courts must use grant funds to improve and support family and juvenile court operations based on standards established by the AOC. Allowable uses include: paying for required training; increasing staff, such as case coordinators; improving court facilities to meet the needs of children and families; enhancing court facilitator programs; and expanding access to social services for families.

The AOC must establish a funding formula for allocating grant funds to ensure that eligible courts in small, medium, and large counties receive grant moneys.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) must evaluate the implementation of the family and juvenile court improvement grant program. The WSIPP must examine each court's program and consider whether the court is: implementing the principal of one judicial team hearing all the proceedings in a case involving one family, especially in dependency cases;

working towards resolving multiple case types through centralized case management; and implementing practices consistent with the criteria established by the AOC. The WSIPP must report back to the Legislature by December 31, 2009.

Appropriation: The sum of \$1.26 million is appropriated to be deposited into the family and juvenile court improvement grant account..

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.